



Mamta Kalia as an Iconoclast Feminist: A Reading of Mamta Kalia's Select Poems

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Abstract

Mamta Kalia's poetry marks a dynamic shift of perception from traditional, modest tone to a bold and modern tone. In her poetry, she draws into purview various issues that are too minute to be noticed: women's struggles, societal hypocrisy, middle class ideals and familial conflicts. Her poetry is rooted in the mundane experiences of ordinary human beings. Her work is widely appreciated for its simplicity, wit, and incisive social commentary. Rather than relying on complex or ornate language, her writing style remains straightforward and conversational, making it highly accessible and relatable to readers. "Made for Each Other", "Tribute to Papa" and "After Eight Years" have been taken up in this paper to shed light on the iconoclastic strain that runs in the poetry of Mamta Kalia. Through these poems, an attempt has been made to hold up a mirror to the society that has been prejudiced towards half of its inhabitants. The selected poems reveal the lived experiences of a daughter, a beloved and a wife. The strain of a non-conformist and an iconoclast woman runs in the select poems. The women in her poems are the representatives of ordinary women who are defiant, critical, inquisitive as well as submissive, filial and docile.

Mamta Kalia, born in 1940 in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, is a prominent Indian poet, novelist, and short-story writer who has contributed to both English and Hindi literature. She started her literary journey in English with her debut poetry collection *Tribute to Papa and Other Poems* (1970), which stood out for its bold and satirical voice. Over time, she transitioned primarily to Hindi, establishing herself as a leading figure among contemporary women writers in Hindi literature.

Women and their perceptions have always been the core concern of Mamta Kalia in her works. The lived experiences of women often with middle class families have been occupying prominent

place in her poetry. In her interview to Ashutosh Kumar Thakur for *Outlook*, she speaks about her life, her experiences, inspirations and aspirations that have shaped the trajectory of her literary journey,

Looking back on your prolific career, what do you hope your literary legacy will be, and what advice would you give to aspiring writers, especially women, in the field of Hindi literature?

Future readers will find in my books the ups and downs of educated men and women struggling to make their way in troubled times. Life has never been hassle-free for men and women. The younger you

are the more you suffer. A woman's lot is tougher since she has to balance her career and family. I would say half the fun of life is always working, never shirking. Never blow out your lamp. Never say die. You are winning a race every day.

Beginning with Mamta Kalia's, "Tribute to Papa", from her seminal 1970 collection *Tribute to Papa*, one witnesses a bold and defiant yet obedient daughter's grievances against her father. The poem explores the generational gap and can be read as a richly layered, psychologically complex meditation on patriarchy, memory, and the daughter's quest for selfhood. What appears at first to be a personal recollection gradually unfolds into a wider social critique, exposing how familial authority structures are deeply intertwined with cultural expectations and gendered conditioning. The poem derives much of its power from this dual movement between the intimate and the ideological—where the father is at once an individual figure and a symbolic embodiment of patriarchal order.

At a deeper level, the poem dramatizes not merely conflict but a profound emotional disjunction. The daughter does not simply rebel against her father's authority; she interrogates the very foundations upon which that authority rests. His adherence to discipline, restraint, moral rigidity, and social respectability creates an environment in which emotional expression is stifled. Consequently, the father's virtue becomes paradoxical: while it ensures his social legitimacy, it simultaneously renders him incapable of emotional intimacy. The daughter's resentment, therefore, is inseparable from her longing; her critique is underwritten by an unfulfilled desire for warmth and recognition.

This tension between longing and resistance is central to the poem's emotional architecture. The speaker's voice oscillates between biting irony and subdued grief, suggesting that her anger is not merely oppositional but also deeply wounded. She uses sarcasm, exaggeration, and ironic fantasy to critique her father and as a mechanism of self-defence. For instance, her imagined scenario of a father engaged in smuggling is not a literal wish but a symbolic inversion of values: she momentarily privileges material success over moral uprightness to expose the arbitrariness of societal respect. In

doing so, she reveals the fragility of the very ideals her father upholds.

The poem also engages critically with the notion of "greatness" as imposed by patriarchal expectations. The father's exhortations for his daughter to become "great" are marked by vagueness and contradiction. His invocation of heroic figures such as Rani Lakshmibai reflects a tendency to idealize women within narrowly defined paradigms of sacrifice and valour, without acknowledging their individuality or autonomy. For the daughter, such expectations are not empowering but burdensome, as they demand conformity to abstract ideals rather than recognition of her lived reality. Her sarcastic dismissal of these ideals signals a refusal to internalize externally imposed definitions of worth.

Another significant dimension of the poem lies in its exploration of language and silence. The father's authority is sustained not only through explicit instruction but also through an unspoken regime of control. The daughter's voice, in contrast, emerges as an act of reclamation. By articulating what was previously suppressed, her dissatisfaction, her emotional needs, her critique, actually she disrupts the silence that once defined her existence. In this sense, the poem itself becomes a space of resistance, where speech functions as an assertion of agency.

The generational divide depicted in the poem is not merely temporal but epistemological. The father inhabits a worldview governed by certainty, hierarchy, and moral absolutism, whereas the daughter represents a more fluid, questioning consciousness. This divergence results in a fundamental incompatibility: communication between them is impeded not simply by difference but by the absence of a shared framework of understanding. The father's suspicion and moral anxiety, particularly regarding issues of female sexuality, further intensify this divide, revealing the extent to which patriarchal control is invested in regulating women's bodies and choices.

The poem's engagement with taboo subjects marks one of its most radical gestures. By invoking scenarios involving illicit pregnancy and the refusal of abortion, the speaker confronts the

oppressive logic of “honour” that governs patriarchal societies. The suggestion that the father would prefer death over social disgrace underscores the extremity of these values, exposing their dehumanizing consequences. Here, the poem transcends personal grievance to articulate a broader feminist critique: it reveals how the burden of preserving familial and social honour is disproportionately placed upon women, often at the cost of their autonomy and well-being.

Importantly, the poem does not resolve its tensions. The father’s death does not bring closure; instead, it intensifies the daughter’s sense of incompleteness. This unresolved quality is crucial, as it reflects the enduring nature of emotional trauma. The daughter’s longing for a different kind of relationship which is characterized by empathy, communication and mutual respect remains unfulfilled. The father, in memory, becomes both an object of critique and a figure of loss, embodying the irreconcilable gap between what was and what might have been.

Kalia’s use of irony is particularly significant. Irony in the poem is not merely a rhetorical device but a mode of perception, enabling the speaker to navigate the contradictions of her experience. It allows her to critique without sentimentality, to express pain without overt vulnerability, and to assert independence without entirely relinquishing emotional attachment. This layered tonal quality lends the poem its distinctive strength, making it at once incisive and deeply affecting.

Ultimately, *Tribute to Papa* can be seen as a powerful exploration of identity formation within restrictive social structures. The daughter’s struggle is not only against her father but against the internalized norms he represents. Her journey toward self-definition involves both rejection and re-evaluation—she must disentangle herself from inherited values while also confronting the emotional residues they leave behind.

In this light, the poem stands as a significant feminist text, not because it offers easy resolutions, but because it articulates the complexity of resistance. It acknowledges that liberation is not merely an external act of

defiance but an internal process of negotiation, memory, and self-realization. Through its candid and unsparing portrayal of a father-daughter relationship, Mamta Kalia ultimately invites readers to reconsider the nature of authority, the cost of emotional silence, and the possibility of forging identities beyond the constraints of tradition.

What if my tummy starts showing gradually
And I refuse to have it curetted
But I’ll be careful, Papa,
Or I know you’ll at once think of suicide.
(Tribute to Papa)

These lines are uncompromising and emotionally charged. On one hand, the speaker confronts taboo topics like illicit pregnancy and refusal for abortion (“curetted”) while on the other hand she imagines her father would rather die than face societal dishonor tied to her choices. This exposes the crushing weight of patriarchal shame.

Oscillating between sarcasm, defiance, and deep emotional wound, Kalia critiques patriarchal ideals, exposing how a father’s rigid morality can function as a limiting, oppressive force. The poem is a feminist act of expression, asserting the daughter’s modern identity and emotional autonomy. The final lines reveal a psychological truth—the unbearable weight of paternal expectations and societal judgment, and the daughter’s awareness of her father’s emotional fragility.

The poet reflects upon the emotional alienation of a daughter within a patriarchal family structure, represented by a domineering father. The speaker reflects on her upbringing, questioning why her father’s rigid, outdated values were imposed upon her, and why her own voice, opinions, and desires were disregarded. This brings in the clash between tradition and modernity — the father, rooted in values expects obedience, discipline, and moral conduct according to his worldview. The daughter, however, represents a generation that seeks freedom of thought, emotional connection, and the right to shape their own identity.

There is also a strong theme of emotional deprivation. The speaker repeatedly expresses that she longed for affection, understanding, and attention from her father — not just discipline or

expectations. The absence of love, warmth, and validation leaves a lifelong impact on her psyche, even after the father's death.

Mamta Kalia's "Tribute to Papa," delivers a biting feminist critique of patriarchy through a daughter's mock eulogy to her deceased father, unmasking his authoritarianism, emotional tyranny, and regressive values as emblems of male supremacy that crush women's autonomy and selfhood. Far from conventional filial reverence, the poem weaponizes irony to dismantle the pedestal of paternal sanctity, positioning Papa as a microcosm of entrenched Indian patriarchal norms that prioritize control over compassion.

The title itself drips with sarcasm—a "tribute" that swiftly curdles into condemnation. The speaker rejects her father's "sacredness" with visceral disdain, scorning his conservative existence, moral posturing, and suffocating oversight. He looms as the quintessential patriarch: a vigilant censor of her "love letters" and fleeting smiles toward boys, embodying a spy-like vigilance born of possessive entitlement. This surveillance isn't protective love but gendered domination, preconditioning daughters for lifelong submission by policing their desires and curtailing emotional freedom. Kalia exposes how such fathers enforce a sterile piety—non-materialist on the surface, yet riddled with hypocrisy—rejecting worldly joys while binding women to duty-bound shadows of themselves.

Patriarchal control manifests brutally in Papa's emotional repression. He forbids "love-talk," warmth, or independence, wielding suicide threats as emotional blackmail to perpetuate dominance. The speaker's "hateful statements" signal outright rebellion, a refusal to romanticize his legacy or feign grief. Kalia contrasts Papa's outdated ideals with her modern materialism and candor, highlighting a generational rupture: his world of restraint versus her demand for agency, pleasure, and unfiltered truth.

The poem's power lies in its universal resonance. Post-death, society expects sanitized praise, but Kalia defies this, voicing the silenced rage of daughters groomed for erasure. Patriarchy here isn't abstract; it's personal—girlhood biases favoring sons, familial hierarchies that stifle intellect, and traditions that render women

relational appendages. Through colloquial vigor and witty brevity, the speaker evolves from suppressed daughter to defiant quester, transforming private grievance into collective feminist indictment. Papa's demise liberates her voice, but the critique endures: his kind perpetuates cycles of subjugation, from domestic prisons to societal scripts.

Moving from a defiant daughter to a defiant girl, "Made for Each Other" offers a witty and subversive reimagining of intimacy, suggesting that emotional closeness arises not from romantic idealism but from shared irreverence and mutual dissent. As per the societal belief, marriages are pre-destined or marriages are made in heaven, which connotes that humans are only subjects at the hands of God with reference to matrimonial alliances. Resisting such a destiny-based belief, the speaker and her companion forge their bond through a collective rejection of cultural and literary conventions—ranging from canonical works like *The Faerie Queene* to traditional foods such as dahi vadas and entrenched social practices like arranged marriage. Rather than privileging beauty or perfection, they find affinity in imperfection—an ill-fitting kurta, thick spectacles, and a tone of self-deprecating humour. Their satirical remarks about "pretty girls" and "boys" further dismantle superficial gender stereotypes. The poem culminates in an impulsive yet defiant declaration, "Let's get married and damn the world"—which encapsulates both rebellion and solidarity. In doing so, the poem reconceptualizes love as grounded in realism, irony, and resistance. The opening establishes an unexpected mode of intimacy. Instead of emerging from admiration or romantic allure, the connection develops through shared aversions, lending the poem an ironic undertone. The speaker takes evident delight in her companion's rejection of both Western literary traditions and Indian social conventions, thereby underscoring their shared iconoclastic sensibility. Reciprocally, the companion derives pleasure from the speaker's perceived flaws—her unkempt attire, smoking habit, and impaired vision. This inversion of conventional aesthetics foregrounds authenticity over idealization, suggesting that genuine intimacy thrives on candid acceptance rather than curated perfection. The companion's

dismissal of “pretty girls” as shallow gestures toward a critique of normative femininity, while the speaker’s exaggerated mockery of boys mirrors this sentiment. Together, these exchanges parody dominant gender constructs, reinforcing their bond through humour and critical awareness. The concluding proposal, delivered with impulsive fervour, is devoid of sentimental romanticism and instead signifies an act of collective defiance. It transforms marriage from a socially sanctioned institution into a rebellious gesture, thereby subverting its conventional connotations.

The title *Made for Each Other* operates with deliberate irony. Conventionally associated with harmonious compatibility and idealized union, it is here recontextualized to signify a relationship based and built upon shared marginality and dissent. Their compatibility emerges not from complementary perfections but from a mutual repudiation of societal expectations and an embrace of imperfection.

Thus, the title acquires a distinctly satirical resonance: the pair are “made for each other” precisely because they resist the very criteria that traditionally define such a union. Through this ironic inversion, Mamta Kalia articulates a feminist and anti-romantic vision, wherein authentic connection is located in unembellished companionship, intellectual camaraderie, and a shared resistance to normative ideals.

In another interview to *The Wire*, she says, We kept writing against the institution of marriage, we kept writing against the family. And a thing like competition has never touched our thinking. We were writing stories of ordinary people and at the same time we were assuming that we had to create a different kind of family,” she said. Ravindra wrote mostly on the unprivileged and she wrote on the struggles of the working and unmarried woman.

“After Eight Years of Marriage,” is a poem where irony slices through marital bliss’s facade, exposing entrapment and regret. In “Tribute to Papa”, familial bonds twist into sources of control, with female speakers teetering between dutiful compliance and simmering revolt. This oscillation underscores the brutal tension: inner

desires crushed by external scripts. The poem strips away illusions further, portraying women as faceless cogs—interchangeable vessels for labor and service, their talents sidelined. Kalia’s irony doesn’t just mock; it magnifies contradictions, turning quiet desperation into a clarion call.

Yet Kalia elevates women beyond victimhood. Her speakers emerge as sharp thinkers, dissenting against oppression and yearning for transformation. Poems pulse with a feminist pulse: reclaiming pleasure, agency, and space in a world that denies them. She sidesteps militant rhetoric, opting for humor’s scalpel and brevity’s punch—everyday lingo that transforms mundane chores into searing critique. This accessibility broadens her reach, resonating with diverse readers and amplifying silenced domestic truths.

In essence, Kalia’s poetry intervenes decisively in Indian feminist discourse. Her thematic daring and stylistic flair—blending wit, irony, and stark realism—hoist marginal voices into the spotlight. She compels empathy for women’s unseen emotional labor, psychic wounds, and fierce quest for liberation from hierarchical chains. By etching these narratives into modern Indian English poetry’s canon, Kalia ensures their permanence: validated, visible, and vital. Her legacy affirms poetry’s power to not just witness but reshape the gender story.

Mamta Kalia’s poetry stands as a searing indictment of identity loss, portraying it as the inexorable toll of patriarchal institutions—chiefly marriage and the suffocating joint family system—that systematically dismantle women’s sense of self, relegating them to faceless archetypes of domestic drudgery: the cook, the caregiver, the servant. This theme pulses through her work with unflinching candor, transforming personal confessions into a collective feminist lament for erased individuality. No longer a singular artist or dreamer, she embodies the generic Indian middle-class wife, her identity submerged in relentless cycles of labor—cooking endless meals, scrubbing clothes, bearing children, and rearing them amid indifference. Kalia’s stark naming game underscores the horror: women become interchangeable parts in the familial machine, their talents, ambitions, and inner lives

discarded like yesterday's leftovers. This poem is no mere whine; it's a mirror held to society's blind spot, where individuality evaporates under the weight of expectation.

Echoing this void, "After Eight Years of Marriage" chronicles a woman's homecoming to her parents after nearly a decade of wedlock. Their innocent query—"Are you happy, tell us?"—elicits not laughter or truth, but tears hastily stifled behind a "shielded smile of great content." Here, identity loss manifests as performative bliss: autonomy clipped like wings, freedoms bartered for wifely duty. In-law scrutiny and household hierarchies render her a relational shadow—mother to children, daughter-in-law to elders, wife to a husband—existing only in service to others. The joint family's communal facade masks her isolation, where personal desires fester unspoken, autonomy a distant memory from pre-marital days. This erosion traces back to girlhood, where son-preference sows the seeds of subordination. Toys, education, opportunities—all funneled to boys—prime girls for diminishment, foreshadowing marital cages. Kalia evokes psychological suffocation: intellects dulled, passions starved, women internalizing roles that choke their essence. Yet rebellion simmers beneath compliance; speakers chafe against scripts, their silence a prelude to dissent.

Kalia's genius lies in stylistic alchemy. Colloquial vigor, laced with irony and wit, elevates domestic trivia to profound critique. Brevity sharpens the blade—short lines mimic stifled breaths—while humor disarms, making anguish relatable. Her protagonists evolve: from passive vessels to questers, demanding space for pleasure, agency, voice. This arc reframes loss as catalyst, personal crises fueling a feminist insurgency against traditions that homogenize women. Ultimately, Kalia's oeuvre insists identity isn't static but reclaimable. By voicing the marginalized, she disrupts the canon, validating silenced struggles and igniting quests for selfhood. In post-independence Indian English poetry, her work carves enduring space for women's psychic battles, proving literature's power to resurrect the lost self amid oppression.

Thus we see that Kalia's oeuvre is a battlefield of resistance and raw disclosure. It reflects her vivid portrayals of women's everyday struggles:

the psychological chokehold of domesticity, the steady erosion of individuality under gendered mandates. Through motifs of marital disillusion, autonomy's theft, gendered violence, and identity's erasure, Kalia dismantles the ironclad norms dictating women's roles in family and society. Her lens reveals not just personal plights but systemic failures, urging readers to confront the human cost.

Post-independence Indian English Literature has experienced a vibrant surge in women's poetic voices, boldly challenging patriarchal narratives and reimagining gender and marginality. Amid this renaissance, Mamta Kalia shines as a candid, witty force. Often hailed as a post-Kamala Das voice, she wields colloquial energy to unmask the gritty socio-cultural confines of Indian womanhood. Far from mere confession, her poetry echoes the collective anguish—silent sufferings, stifled identities, and emotional storms—of women trapped in patriarchal webs. Her poems strengthen her role as a poet of women's awakening. By scorning paternal myths, she carves space for identity reclamation, challenging readers to question dominance disguised as duty. In post-independence Indian English poetry, her work stands as a milestone which is raw, rebellious, and revelatory, hence proving literature's potency in toppling patriarchal idols and amplifying marginalized truths.

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